



Green Letters

Studies in Ecocriticism

ISSN: 1468-8417 (Print) 2168-1414 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rgrl20>

The great derangement: climate change and the unthinkable

Veronica Fibisan

To cite this article: Veronica Fibisan (2019) The great derangement: climate change and the unthinkable, Green Letters, 23:1, 110-113, DOI: [10.1080/14688417.2019.1586142](https://doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2019.1586142)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2019.1586142>



Published online: 01 Mar 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 27



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

architecture, language, literature, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, history, gender studies and geography, the depth and diversity of work that makes up the *Companion* is both impressive and daunting. Recently, Hubert Zapf drew attention to what he saw as a 'disturbing implication' of the 'recent explosion of productivity in ecocritical thought' and 'its expansion into more and more disciplines across the environmental humanities': the challenge for any single scholar of assimilating and integrating such a simultaneously 'specialized and differentiated' body of knowledge (Zapf 2016, 5). But whilst the *Routledge Companion* reflects that challenge in the diversity of essays that make it up, it also underlines what is at stake in drawing this body of knowledge together, and how that process of integration might be achieved. This is not just a question of carefully themed sections, or well-chosen essays (most of those here are, I should add, quite short). It also requires us to acknowledge, as Heise notes in her introduction, that difference and dissent are themselves a constructive part of the process.

Taken altogether, this impressive body of work represents an important step towards the establishment of an environmental humanities with the flexibility to build on its own differences and collaborate across disciplinary boundaries. '[G]rounded in an understanding of ecological crises as fundamentally cultural processes', its aim must be, as Heise suggests, to help 'create a more sustainable world for humans and the species that coinhabit the planet with us' (9).

Reference

Zapf, H. 2016. *Literature as Cultural Ecology: Sustainable Texts*. London: Bloomsbury.

A G Tait
Independent Scholar
 spud.tait@gmail.com

© 2019 A G Tait
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2019.1586146>



The great derangement: climate change and the unthinkable, by Amitav Ghosh, Gurgaon, Penguin Books India, 2016, 275 pp., £13.48 (hardback), ISBN 10-0670089133

The satellite image of the Ganges Delta on the cover of Ghosh's book lays bare the water's intricate patterns on the low-lying area. This reminds the reader of how liable the area is to flooding, and due to its dense population, the danger to people and creatures. Based on a series of lectures delivered at the University of Chicago, *The Great Derangement* is structured in three parts titled 'Stories', 'History' and 'Politics', placed in triangulation on the contents page. This suggests the interconnectedness between the topics and their equal importance; however, it is the 'Stories' at the top of Ghosh's triangle that takes the lead which is also the longest section.

According to Ghosh, the Earth is currently in a period that he calls the 'Great Derangement' (11) and future generations will look back in bewilderment at our ignorance of the truly significant issues threatening our safety and happiness on this planet. Throughout the three sections of his book, Ghosh takes us through stories, histories and politics, always bringing us back to reality, to the environmental occurrences that are unfolding around us. He interweaves his statements by touching upon on his own fiction including *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *Flood of Fire* (2015) as key texts for the type of writing that he endorses throughout *The Great Derangement*. Ghosh admits that poetry 'has long had an intimate relationship with climatic events' (26), whilst fiction has tackled these issues primarily through surrealist, magical realist and cli-fi novels, none of

which present weather events in the way in which 'they are actually happening on this earth, at this time' (27).

Ghosh refers to the gradual 'separation of science fiction from the literary mainstream' by focusing on how *Frankenstein* was written but only later 'regarded as the first great novel of science fiction' (68). However, he also questions why this happened in the first place, one possible answer being Bruno Latour's 'project of "partitioning", or deepening the imaginary gulf between Nature and Culture' (68). This dichotomy stands alongside others to do with human/non-human and gender, which continues to be explored in extensive ways by researchers from an array of disciplines. Ghosh extends his question to whether 'science fiction is better equipped to address the Anthropocene than mainstream literary fiction' (72), introducing the cli-fi genre, which he deems unsuitable to tackle the Anthropocene because this is 'not an imagined "other" world apart from ours; nor is it located in another "time" or another "dimension"' (73).

At the beginning of the midsection of his book, *Histories*, Ghosh plunges us into Capitalism, seen as 'one of the principal drivers of climate change', and the equally important topics of 'empire and imperialism' (87). Asia takes centre stage in this study, as it 'is conceptually critical to every aspect of global warming: its causes, its philosophical and historical implications, and the possibility of a global response to it' (87). Its unique sociopolitical context and history have enabled it with two of the most powerful tools that we as humans can possess: the ability to significantly speed-up anthropogenic climate change or to crucially halt its advancement. Ghosh then moves on to the history of carbon economy and how this has led to 'our lives and our choices [being] enfram[ed] in a pattern of history that seems to leave us nowhere to turn but toward our self-annihilation' (111). Despite climate events that are happening at a rate which makes them impossible to ignore, the general perception is still that they are 'a problem created by an utterly distant "Other"' (114). This hyperseparation outlines the difficulty of the Anthropocene as a concept, and the fact that if we will not unite against meaningful environmental change (potentially altering every aspect of our current exploitative and economically driven lives) then we really do not stand a chance against the cycle of destruction that we have unleashed.

Whilst Naomi Klein draws upon similar issues to Ghosh, tracing origins of the climate crisis 'to the coal-fuelled emergence of industrial capitalism in Britain, inextricably intertwined with colonialism, slavery and racism,'¹ she omits the crucial role that imperialism has played in accelerating the climate crisis. It is one of the essential triggers of the 'Great Derangement' and lies at the background of Ghosh's argument as 'inequality is a barrier to action on environmental problems, including climate change.'²

In his third and last section, titled 'Politics', Ghosh begins with 'the idea of freedom' (119) spread across various disciplines, outlining the fact that we have 'never been free of nonhuman constraints' (119). Ghosh looks at morality as being the link between 'the political and literary imaginary' (127). Climate change has been framed as a 'moral issue' (132) by a significant number of people, when 'yardsticks of morality are not the same everywhere' (133). Within literary criticism there is a more unified vision of what sort of representations would most benefit the climate crisis, with emphasis on elements such as immediacy, realism and equality which would help narratives send the right messages across and raise awareness of current ecocatastrophes. Ghosh looks closely at the year 2015 in terms of climate change events, the list of which is quite extensive. However, literary fiction and the arts 'remained unperturbed' (150). There may be a delay to the transposition of such events into works of fiction, however, the flash floods of Texas and Oklahoma, the draughts in Brazil and California and the heat waves in India, Pakistan and Europe, etc. have yet become topics of bestsellers.

Ghosh compares the Paris agreement (December 2015) and Pope Francis's letter *Laudato Si'* (May 2015), two texts whose differences vastly outnumber their similarities. Based on scientific

environmental research they both acknowledge the fact that the 'climate is changing and that human beings are largely responsible for these changes' (151). The idea of 'miraculous interventions' (153) is only present in the Paris Agreement, whose target of no more than a 1.5 increase in global mean temperatures is not accomplishable given the current state of the environment.

Careful proofing of the book should have brought to light some date errors; the Lake Nyos limnic eruption occurred in Cameroon in 1986, as Ghosh might have confused it with Lake Kivu, a similar lake which lies on the border between the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda (5); the Bhola cyclone which killed some 300 thousand people took place in 1970, not 1971 (88); and the Paris attacks took place on 13 November 2015, not 2 December (156). Whilst these errors might not seem too significant considering the scope of the book, they do create a slight breach of confidence and disrupt the otherwise engaging text.

Ghosh ends his study on a hopeful note, similar to other scholars such as Klein,³ that humanity 'will rediscover their kinship with other beings' and this event 'will find expression in a transformed and renewed art and literature' (162). *The Great Derangement* sits comfortably on the shelf next to Kate Rigby's *Dancing with Disaster*⁴ and George Monbiot's *Out of the Wreckage*⁵ and others who pose similar questions about the climate crisis, its narrative representations and what can be done in order to delay its advancement, if not stop it altogether. *The Great Derangement* is also a plea to writers urging them to explore climate change in their work in a way which reflects rather than distorts it. The question of why serious fiction has stayed in the shadows remains unanswered. Can the publishing industry be so market driven that they have chased away any potential fiction that tackles climate change or re-oriented it towards the more shocking cli-fi? Perhaps, writers have realised that the new nature writing can be a more effective tool in raising awareness about anthropogenic climate change or it might simply be the case that serious fiction has not caught up with the issues that are plaguing the Anthropocene. Whichever the case, it is through studies such as *The Great Derangement* that these questions are raised and explored, and the fact that we are running out of time is made more obvious than ever.

Notes

1. Robert A. Hackett, 'Climate Crisis and Communication: Reflections on Naomi Klein's *This Changes Everything*', *Media and Communication*, 3:1 (2015), p. 2, doi: 10.17645/mac.v3i1.304.
2. Julia A. Thomas, Prasannan Parthasarathi, Rob Linrothe, Fa-Ti Fan, Kenneth Pomeranz, Amitav Ghosh, 'JAS Round Table on Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 75:4 (2016), p. 934, doi:10.1017/S0021911816001121.
3. Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2014).
4. Kate Rigby, *Dancing with Disaster: Environmental Histories, Narratives, and Ethics for Perilous Times* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015).
5. George Monbiot, *Out of the Wreckage* (London: Verso Books, 2017).

Veronica Fibisan
School of English, The University of Sheffield
 verafibisan@yahoo.com

© 2019 Veronica Fibisan
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2019.1586142>

